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Poetic Protest against Human Ascendancy over Animals: An Eco-Critical Reading of Ralph Hodgson's "The Stupidity Street"

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Abstract

In 18th century England the artificial preservation of uncultivated hilltops would have seemed as absurd as the present day creation of sanctuaries for wild birds and animals which cannot be eaten or hunted. It is difficult nowadays to recapture the breathtaking anthropocentric spirit in which the eighteenth century English people interpreted the biblical stories. Not only representing man as merely a superior animal, it elevated him to a wholly different status, halfway between the beasts and the angels. They believed that the earthly creatures other than men were not made for themselves, but for the use and service of men. Man's task, in the words of (Genesis, I. 28), was 'to replenish the earth and subdue it', to level the woods to till the soil, drive off the predators, kill the vermin, plough up the bracken, drain the fens. Again, according to (Genesis, ix. 2-3), "The Garden of Eden", was a paradise prepared for man in which Adam had god-given dominion over all living things: "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, And every fowl of the air...Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you" (Thomas, 18). But in the process some long established dogmas about man's place in nature were discarded and new sensibilities arose towards animals, plants and landscape. The relationship

of man and other species was redefined; and his right to exploit those species for his own advantage was sharply challenged. This paper seeks to bring out the assumptions, some barely articulated, which underlay the perceptions, reasoning and feelings of the inhabitants of early modern England towards the animals, birds, vegetation and physical landscape amongst which they spent their lives, often in conditions of proximity which are now difficult to appreciate. It also seeks to persuade its readers that its subject-matter deserves more serious historical treatment than it had received. Man's ascendancy over the animal and vegetable world has, after all, been a basic precondition of human history. Therefore this paper has much to offer historians, for it is impossible to disentangle what the people of the past thought about birds and animals from what they thought about themselves.

Keywords

Ralph Hodgson's "The Stupidity Street", Eco-Criticism, Eco-centric, Poetic protest, Human Ascendancy, Anthropocentrism.

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During the last decade of the 20th century it became obvious that the greatest problem of the 21st century would be the survival of the earth. Men themselves are responsible for that, in consequence man felt vitally threatened in the ecologically degraded world. The end of the 20th century showed that everyone had to do something to think for the betterment of the environment and to help the earth to survive. Ecocriticism investigate such things as the underlying ecological values, human perception of the wilderness, environmental degradation in literature and its possible solutions. Glotfelty's definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is that:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading

of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty xix)

Again Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as a "...study of the relationship between literature and the environment, conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis" (Buell, 25). As a sort of literary interpretation, ecocriticism adds a dimension that the average reader might have missed that man together with his immediate environment or space must be protected and preserved. By doing so, one comes to a broad term 'deep ecology' which is a combination of the physical and social, individual and global. The term 'deep ecology' was coined by Arne Naess, a Norwegian thinker and according to him; the aim of the supporters of deep ecology movement is not a slight reform of our present society, but a substantial reorientation of our whole civilization.

According to the deep ecologists life becomes meaningful only when one starts to live truly and selflessly. The utilitarian principle of equality which is the core of deep ecology, states that everyone is entitled to equal moral consideration, irrespective of family, race, nation or species, and if a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. Environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott claims that:

All the entities possessed a consciousness, reason, and volition, no less intense and complete than a human being's...trees, insects, birds and all other animals therefore had personalities and were thus as fully persons as other human beings. (Callicott 243)

The concern for ecology and the continuous misuse of our environment has recently caught the attention of literature which is often used to rouse a protest against the evils. In the present paper the researcher will evaluate how a poem "The Stupidity Street" by Ralph Hodgson, portrays the merciless human ascendancy over birds. The prescriptive tenets of deep ecology can be found in the poem. Hodgson's deep sympathy for the merciless killing of song-birds and his concern for the future of the earth, accounts how he cease to think in terms of anthropocentric alone and extend his vision into the heart of all being in a trans-humanistic ecocentrism. Poetry about animals, that is to say poetry which,

consciously or unconsciously, expresses to some degree the feeling of man's sympathetic connection or bond with the other creatures of the earth whether in the sense of kinship or fellowship or even lordship, has existed for thousands of years, side by side of course with a far greater volume of its opposite, the poetry which treats animals as merely man's antagonists or tools or playthings: poems of hunting, sport, and so forth. From the eighteenth century onwards there has been a steady and rapid increase of these deep ecological poems of protest in Western literature. It is pleasant to record that this increase is especially noticeable in English literature.

For birds, being creatures intensely mobile, bright, musical, sensitive, and aesthetic, have naturally always attracted the attention of poets, and served them as symbols in countless works of imagination. The dominant theme of Hodgson's poem, as evident from the title is "Stupidity" of men and the protest against it. Of all the stupidities of man, his neurotic obsession for meats of animals, especially the meats of birds is quite appalling. In all cases the climax of the hunt is the death of the hunted, and Montaigne observes that to hunt without killing is like having sexual intercourse without orgasm. Again the Virginian gentleman William Byrd, guessed that: "Hose-flies had been created so that men should exercise their wits and industry to guard themselves against them, apes and parrots had been ordained for man's mirth and singing-birds were devised on purpose to entertain and delight mankind" (Thomas 19). The pursuit of birds with gun was a popular hobby in the seventeenth century England and those who engaged in these cruel sports were seldom inhibited by concern for them. There were caged-birds, kept either for their song or for their imitation of the human voice. But this poem proves that the caged song-birds were often sold for meat. Most often it was the nature of the particular creature's diet which determined its edible status: "The animals most generally eaten were the vegetarians feeding on grasses, whereas the carnivorous beasts feeding on carrions were rejected and unfortunately the birds belong to the former" (Garrard, 46). On a first reading of the poem, one notes the neat bifurcation, the split between what Hodgson's vision sees "with open eyes" and "in vision":

I saw with open eyes. Singing birds sweet
Sold in the shops. For the people to eat, sold
In the shops of Stupidity Street. (Hodgson, 16)

A prophet is supposed to function so, of course, discovering the tuberculosis masked by rosy cheeks. But Hodgson is a sharper poet as the first reading indicates: the irregular, two-foot rhythm and the triply rhymed stanzas, serve not only to emphasize the final stresses of each-- "Stupidity Street"-- but also to draw the reader around for repeated readings so that it may strike the reader's concern and his sense of protest. Perhaps the reader first breezed over the fact that even the scene of "plenty" occurs on Stupidity Street, and perhaps the music lulled him into thinking it was a healthy scene, those people feasting on songbirds, but it is not. The "Songbirds" in this poem, serve a larger purpose, an artistic purpose, short-sighted, short-circuited when people eat them instead of listening to them. The song is a traditional lyric note, like that of an oral performance. It has also added a thin veneer of a deeply humanitarian point - love to nature and natural phenomena, therefore it is an artistic triumph. The eighteenth century Swedish visitor Pehr Kalm noticed that England was different from other countries, in that butcher's meat formed the greater part of the main meal of the day: "I do not believe that any Englishman who is his own master has ever eaten a dinner without meat" (Thomas, 26). There are plenty in the first stanza, but it is a fool's plenty which leads directly into the vision. The simple rhythm is heavy here, but the words skirt ineffective didacticism because of both the rhythm itself and the lean imagery which Hodgson uses to convey his unequivocal environmental message.

Further, the question has been argued at great length in the last half of the poem, which most poignantly reveals the mankind's folly and how they are blind-folded to their cursed future. The "worm in the wheat" might be, in another setting, the image of a natural disorder, a mere famine. But in its place here, Hodgson makes obvious the cause and effect, the first stanza's idiocy leading to the second's starvation:

I saw in vision/ The worm in the wheat,

And in the shops nothing/ For people to eat;
Nothing for sale in stupidity street. (Hodgson, 18)

In drawing a firm line between the man and the animal, the main purpose of the early modernist theorists was to justify hunting, domestication, meat-eating and the wholesale extermination of earthly creatures. Philosopher Rene Descartes proposed an influential account of the difference between mind and body that struggled to eliminate all traces of the similarity between the humans and animals. He had to:

Reinterpret the notion of thinking in such a way that those mental activities which involve the body, such as sense perception, and which appear to bridge the mind/body and human/animal division, become instead, via their reinterpretation in terms of 'consciousness', purely mental operations. (Descartes 115)

Thus Descartes' hyper-separated mind and body denied to animals not only the faculty of reason, but the whole range of feelings and sensations that he had associated with thought. As a result, he saw animals as radically different from, and inferior to humans. They were bodies without minds, effectively machines. Sir Kenelm Digby did not even hesitate to declare that "birds were machines, and that their motions when building their nests and feeding their young were no different from the striking of a clock or the ringing of an alarm" (Thomas, 35). But this abiding urge to distinguish men from animals also has dire consequences for relations between men. For, if the essence of humanity is defined as consisting of some specific quality, then it follows that any man who do not display that quality is sub-human or 'semi-animal'. In each constructed world of nature the contrast between the human and the non-human provides an analogy for the contrast between the member of the human society and the outsider. Although animal insults remain still a feature of human discourse today. They have lost the force they had possessed in an age when animals enjoyed no claim to moral consideration. In many countries those persons who remain on the margins of human society are considered as beasts, and once perceived as beasts, they are liable unfortunately to be treated accordingly. The

ethic of human domination removed animals from the sphere of human concern, and it also legitimizes the ill-treatment of those humans who are in a supposedly animal condition. During the eighteenth century England, the common people themselves were extremely sensitive to the suggestion that they are to be equated with the inferior animals.

Ecocriticism recognizes, as anthropocentrism does not, that human beings live in a more than human world and therefore he must have concern for the non-human creatures:

If humans do learn to care about what happens to other species and ecosystems - that is, to treat nature as if it mattered - then the repercussions of ecological destruction to humans will be lessened. The vital thing, therefore, is to set anthropocentric concerns within ecocentric concerns. (Gerrard 90)

In consequence the much needed protest took the form of demanding that human beings should limit their ascendancy over animals. Gradually the protest reinforced the feeling that men and beasts inhabited the same moral universe and that, terms of praise and reproach could be applied interchangeably to either. The rapid growth power and dominion, continual stressing of the future life at the expense of the present one, arrogant anthropocentrism, and utter lack of interest in the nonhuman creature, undoubtedly served to render that it was this lack of sympathy, surviving in large measure even to modern times, which caused literature almost destitute of zoophilist poetry. The great body of Elizabethan and Jacobean verse was silent on the subject of sympathy with animals. The next age was almost equally barren, though in Marvell, the author of "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn", it produced one humane poet of high achievement who was also a true Nature-lover---"Thrice happy he, who, not mistook, hath read in Nature's sacred book!" However, the literature of the eighteenth century evoked a very different reaction to this protest, for by that time the feelings of human beings for animals had become a matter of urgent concern indeed. There was a great deal of poetry, especially the poems of Hodgson, Cowper, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelly, Byron, Crabbe, which

inflicted protests about particular forms of animal cruelty and designed to excite in people a benevolent conduct to the brute creation.

Mild sympathy for the ill-used animal is replaced by sympathy with the creature, regarded as a sentient fellow-being a sympathy betokening a wider imagination and clearer understanding. In the first half of the eighteenth century we find indications of this new spirit in the work of Pope and some of his contemporaries, notably James Thomson, whose poem "Autumn" was particularly outspoken on the subject of hunting ; while great writers such as Cowper and Goldsmith, coming but little later, were deeply imbued with similar ideas. The age was the age of "sensibility" in poetry as well as in prose; and the close of the century saw humanitarianism, in the widest sense of the word, firmly established in English poetry, in the works of Blake, Burns, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, as well as many lesser English Romantic writers. With the nineteenth century comes Shelley, of whom it need only be said that, as regards his humanitarian ideas and theories, he was perhaps the most intense and at the same time the most logical of all our great writers. "Full of love and sympathy for this feeble ant climbing over grass and leaf, for yonder nightingale pouring forth its song, feeling a community with the finches, with bird, with plant, with animal, and reverently studying all these, and more how is it possible for the heart while thus wrapped up to conceive the desire of crime?", wrote Richard Jeff cries in one of his last essays. This spirit the true spirit of Nature-love permeates much of our most modern poetry; and "poetry", as Shelley said, "is the most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution." Ralph Hodgson's poem blends nature and the human life, like that of Native American literature it gives an impression that we have to engineer our consciousness and rouse our voice for protecting the environment.

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